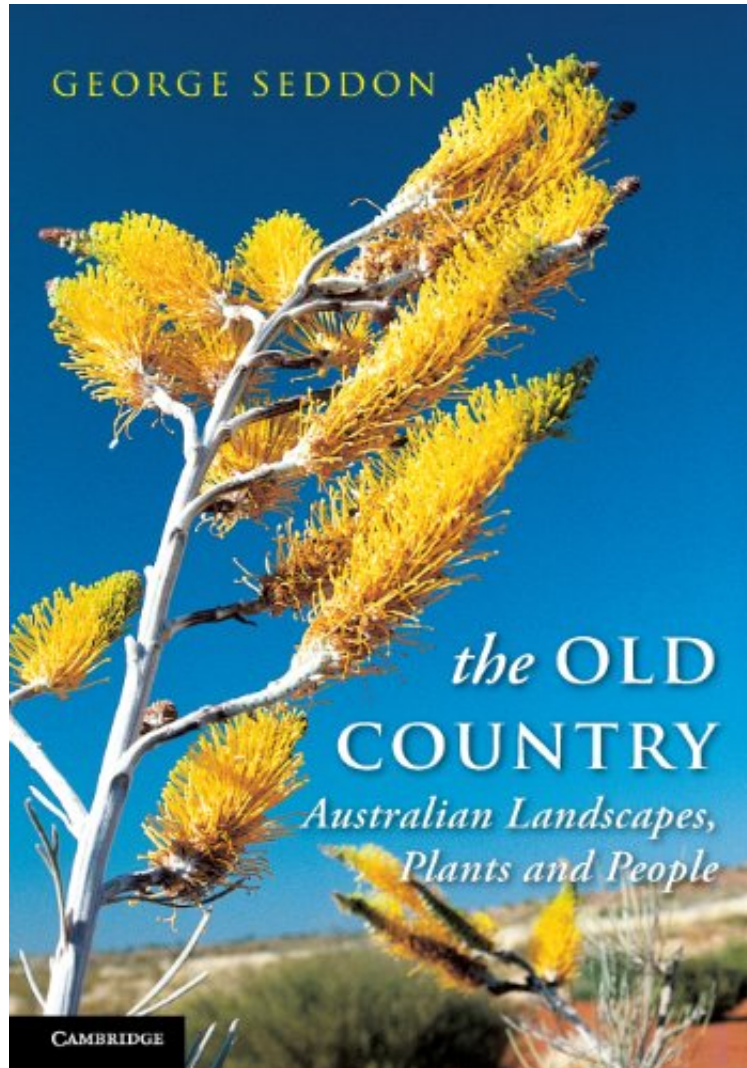


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# The Old Country: Australian Landscapes, Plants and People

*George Seddon*

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**George Seddon : The Old Country: Australian Landscapes, Plants and People** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Old Country: Australian Landscapes, Plants and People:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. informative By Pat Binformative on Australian flora and history 6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. The Grove of Fremantle By Richard J. Weller The Old Country Australian Landscapes Plants and People George Seddon Cambridge University press ISBN-0-521-84310 3270 p. "The men who dwell in the city are my teachers, and not trees or the country". Socrates recorded by Plato Known affectionately as the

Professor for Everything, George Seddon is properly trained and versed in literature, history, philosophy and environmental science. Whereas most spend a life turning the soil in one field, Seddon's remarkable career is a concerted interweaving of several. In the spirit of renaissance men and 18th century polymaths Seddon bridges the arts and the sciences. Although he is not, strictly speaking, qualified in aesthetics or design, his work tends, in a classical sense, toward aesthetic values and qualified judgment of the both the landscape we've been given and the one we are making for ourselves. Since Landscape Architecture is aesthetic and because it is (or rather, likes to think of itself as) a holistic integration of art and science, it is no mistake that he adopted the incipient profession of Landscape Architecture in Australia and became its guiding intellectual. Even though he has not and could not be expected to have remained at the vanguard of contemporary landscape architectural practice and theory (which is now enjoying a global renaissance) his musings have always been of relevance to Australian landscape architects and greatly appreciated as such. Many will be truly saddened to open 'The Old Country' and read that this is his last book and you might also excuse me then if this reads in part like an obituary. The Old Country is not the magnum opus or manifesto one might expect for a finale. Nonetheless, it is an ambitious project because not only does it offer both a scientific and cultural history of the main plant families of Australia but as he works through essentially factual material he reflects on Australian culture in general. That he can do this with a restrained passion for his topic, a respect for the intelligence of his readership and concision of expression will come as no surprise to those who know his work. Through a cultural and scientific history of Australian plants Seddon's essential argument is that the genuine post-colonial maturation of Australian culture is dependant upon both a scientific and poetic depth of knowledge of Australia's unique ecologies. Although over-reliant on subheadings and on occasion scatty, this book is testament to Seddon's exceptional ability to synthesize knowledge from a broad range of sources. Rich in information drawn equally from science, history and his life-long collection of noteworthy anecdotes, the book is an easy read and lavishly illustrated. Seddon awakens (or re-awakens as the case may be) us to the wealth of our nation's botany and its evolutionary, ecological and cultural significance on a range of levels. The seemingly innocuous topic of our plants and how we value and use them provides a lens with which to examine the broader values we apply to our unique environmental circumstance, values that have determined and will determine the fate of Australian culture and the exceptional genealogical inheritance it still tends to take for granted. Without laboring any of them, and often in good humor, The Old Country is a book that brings clarity and reason to seemingly intractable and emotive arguments about the use of Australian plants. Vexed issues surrounding the use of Australian native plants and their evil counterparts, the weeds, are, if not resolved in this book, then at least set out in a manner that will ensure future debates are well informed and reasonable. Similarly, Seddon has a subtle way of bringing together the best of the European enlightenment (of which he is surely a product) and both the indigenous and popular suburban culture of Australia. Underlying this is his usual interest in, and knowledge of how language represents and indeed misrepresents reality and the book is laced with poetic references that embellish the pleasure of the reading rather than just show off his erudition. While there is much in this book for a range of experts in different disciplines and professions, The Old Country is written for a general audience and will probably be filed in the Gardening section in most bookshops, a section that could surely do with less image and more substance. Although underscored and tempered by the empirical evidence of his own gardening experiences, this book is not a 'how to do it' guide, it is rather, a 'how to think about it' guide. Thinking about one's garden by understanding its broader temporal and spatial origins and its possible future consequences is surely a prerequisite to transforming the suburban culture of Australia, a culture academics and professionals have otherwise largely left to TV show presenters to lead. Apart from some general knowledge, sorting out some fuzzy old disputes and inspiring a greater appreciation of our indigenous plants, there is however, not a lot exactly for the contemporary landscape architect in this book. Devoted to the topic of design, Chapter Eight for example is disappointingly brief and for no apparent reason historically curtailed to Ellis Stones, Edna Walling and Oliver Dowell, the latter of whom is, upon the evidence gathered, radically overrated. In this book Seddon has, for whatever reason, chosen to completely ignore the postmodern profession of landscape architecture. Given that this profession alone is the one that can properly advance beyond the garden fence the themes he holds dear (and is also one that needs his advocacy), this omission is troubling. In another life, Seddon was a great landscape architect but in this one he fulfilled the profound lot of the scholar-gardener. It is in his various gardens, and particularly his last in Fremantle, that he has dug into a dry land with a pen in one hand and a spade in the other. As he frankly relates in this book, the practical experience of gardening has both confirmed and at times contradicted his landscape theories. His water-wise oasis is, as he would have it, a model for the broader treatment of our landscape and when it comes to plant selection and the larger ecological ramifications of our choices, this book and the garden it stems from is a cautionary tale worth consulting. Despite fashion, Olives are out. Despite puritanism, Erythrina (sp) are in! One wonders how the Oleander's that lean over his southern fence fit into the scheme of things? More importantly, he explains the absurdity of speaking of Australian plants as some interchangeable lumpen mass, rather, in this vast country there is a mosaic of specific ecologies in specific bio-regions and each species has a particular cultural and ecological history and his cursory but well researched introduction to the nation's botanic archives opens avenues of further research. Over the entrance to Plato's garden, the Academy (the grove at Academos), was the prohibition "Let no one ignorant of

geometry enter here" and while the Greeks contemplated that, the topsoil of their landscape washed away and with it ultimately their civilization. Seddon has spent his life in the garden of the academy but as this book testifies, he has, unlike Plato's mentor Socrates, learned much from the trees and scoured most of the country for clues as to how we should properly live here. Perhaps his greatest knowledge was however learned from his own garden, over the entrance to which could be inscribed "Know thy place". Heeding this message, as he hopes we will, we might not only save the soil upon which our culture is dependant, but we might also achieve what Socrates said was the highest aim of all, to "know thy self". Gardeners come to know themselves through caring for their patch and cultures are, or should be the same. This deceptively simple and eclectic book is after all, about just that - it is about Australia coming of age by better understanding and appreciating its unique place.

We are a nation of gardeners, and we take pleasure in tending our backyards. But this pleasure sits uneasily with our knowledge that the places where most of us live are running out of water. We suspect that our lawns and many of our plants from the damp climates of northern European gardens are too demanding of scarce supplies, but can't imagine our streets and gardens without them. The Old Country opens our eyes, and minds, to other possibilities. It does so by telling us stories about our natural landscape. George Seddon believes that the better we understand the delicacy and beauty of our natural environment, the more 'at home' we will feel as Australians. This passionate, wise and witty book, enriched with breathtakingly beautiful illustrations, suggests that the answers to our water problems lie here, at home.

'George Seddon is Australia's finest placewriter. He combines a light touch with a sureness of foot. The result is a clarity of insight as striking as a Fremantle summer's day. This book offers itself as a companion to the journey that we call Australia. Seddon's achievement is of the finest kind - he connects, but he also speaks with an honesty and precision that is breathtaking.' Peter Beilharz, La Trobe University'George Seddon has inspired and stimulated many, he has made life better and landscapes more beautiful; he has helped us to see our country from the inside. He is a maverick, an original.' Tom Griffiths, Senior Fellow and Head, History Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University'This is an exquisite work. It is lovely to hold and to look at, to feel as well as the writing itself. There is a tremendous mix of poetry, reflection, personal history. The Old Country is a triumph. It is magnificent.' Robyn Williams, 'The Science Show' ABC RadioAbout the AuthorGeorge Seddon AM is an Emeritus Professor of Environmental Science at the University of Melbourne and a Senior Research Associate at the University of Western Australia. He has held chairs in four disciplines and taught in universities across Europe and North America. His recent books include Landprints: Reflections on Place and Landscape (Cambridge University Press, 1996).